

## LIPMAN'S NOVELS OR TURNING PHILOSOPHY INSIDE-OUT

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## Abstract

Starting from two passages of the autobiography of Lipman, which represent the description of a sort of 'primary scene' of P4C, the presented paper shows how the Deweyan notion of qualitative thought is pivotal for the entire Lipmanian undertaking. Dewey's distinction between 'situation' and 'object' in thinking is read into the Lipman differentiation of schemata and concepts and used to analyze the reasons for which narrative comes to play a crucial role in the project of education for thinking. The mobilization of narrative entails a movement of turning the history of philosophy inside out, which may be considered the major achievement (both educationally and philosophically) of Lipman. This movement is opposite to that of mere historicization and can also be construed in terms of 'dramatization,' culminating in the *Bildung*.

Key Words: Matthew Lipman, Bildung, Narrative, Philosophical Novel.

Las novelas de Lipman o llevar a la filosofía completamente hacia afuera

## Resumen:

A partir de dos pasajes de la autobiografía de Lipman, en los cuales se representa la descripción de una especie de "escena primaria" de P4C, este artículo se propone mostrar cómo la noción de pensamiento cualitativo de Dewey es fundamental en toda la obra lipmaniana. La distinción de Dewey entre "situación" y "objeto" en el pensamiento es leída en el interior de la diferenciación que Lipman hace de esquema y concepto para analizar las razones por las cuales la narrativa juega un papel crucial en el proyecto de educación para el pensamiento. La movilización de la narrativa implica un movimiento de llevar la historia de la filosofía hacia afuera, el cual puede ser considerado el mayor logro (educativo y filosófico) de Lipman. Este movimiento es opuesto a la mera historización y puede también ser construido en términos de "dramatización", culminando en la *Buildung*.

Palabras Llave: Matthew Lipman, Bildung, Narrativa, Novela Filosófica.

As novelas de Lipman ou virar a filosofia de cabeça para baixo

## Resumo:

A partir dos trechos da autobiografia de Lipman, nos quais se representa a descrição de uma espécie de "cena primária" de P4C, o presente artigo se propõe mostrar como a noção de pensamento qualitativa de Dewey é fundamental em toda a obra lipmaniana. A distinção de Dewey entre "situação" e "objeto" no pensamento é lida no interior da diferenciação que Lipman faz entre esquema e conceito para analisar as razões pelas quais a narrativa tem um papel crucial no projeto de educação para o pensamento. A mobilização da narrativa implica

um movimento de virar a história da filosofia de cabeça para baixo, o que pode ser considerado o maior êxito (educativo e filosófico) de Lipman. Esse movimento é oposto à mera historicização e pode também ser construído em termos de “dramatização”, culminando na *Bildung*.

Palavras-chave: Matthew Lipman, Bildung, Narrativa, Novela Filosófica.



## LIPMAN'S NOVELS OR TURNING PHILOSOPHY INSIDE-OUT

**The 'Primary Scene' of P4C**

In Lipman's autobiography the account of how the project of writing a philosophical novel emerged is immediately preceded by the memory of a children's art exhibition. The relevant passages are worth mentioning at length:

The painting showed me a depth that I hadn't thought children were capable of, and I had little difficulty understanding their creative processes as a form of thinking. I began to wonder, if children could contrive such powerful works in this medium, what were they capable of in other media?...Could there not be certain topics on which children's *thinking* approached or perhaps even exceeded the thinking of adults? Could there not be in children what Dewey called 'qualitative thought' – though in sounds and in colors, for example, and not just in words, concepts or logical relationships?...The children's art exhibition at Summerhill touched off in me a lively scepticism about the reduction of all thinking about thinking to linguistic discourse...And it added to the respect that was growing in me for the curious power of thought of children...<sup>1</sup>

Such an account is explicitly related by Lipman himself to another memory, more closely connected with his personal family life:

My own son, Will, managed to underscore this point [i.e. the curious power of thought of children SO] one day as he stepped out of the bath around age two. As I handed Will his pajamas, he noticed that they were inside-out and immediately exclaimed, "Oh, japamas!"...On one occasion we were discussing [with Rudolph Arnheim] the symmetries that sometimes emerged between thought and behaviour...and this is when I shared the story of Will inverting the word 'pajamas' to 'japamas' to parallel the visual display of inside-out pajamas that he saw before him.<sup>2</sup>

The latter episode works strikingly as a springboard to a *definition* of the entire project of Philosophy for Children (P4C):

Twenty years later, when a champion of Philosophy for Children, Professor Alex Andonov of the University of Sofia in Bulgaria, was asked how he would characterize this new version of philosophy, he replied, "Why, it's *inside-out* philosophy!" What a wonderful insight on

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew Lipman, *A Life Teaching Thinking* (Montclair, NJ: Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy for Children, 2008), 105-6.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, 106.

Andonov's part of the relationship between philosophy for children and traditional philosophy!<sup>3</sup>

Without indulging in a more in-depth and thorough analysis of these passages it is possible to state that they have to do with a sort of 'primary scene' (the expression being here destitute of any pulsional overtones). Investigating into this, in its layers and thematic nodes, provides a major access to the origin, meaning and import of Lipman's view about philosophical novels. Within the framework of this present paper it will be impossible to disentangle the many and multifarious theoretical threads interwoven in the quoted passages—for example, how is the idea of P4C connected to a re-discovery and a re-valorisation of the thoughtful dimension of perception, as Rudolph Arnheim, mentioned by Lipman, taught us to detect? How are the pre-/non-linguistic dimensions of thinking linked with the linguistic ones and how does the very recognition of this link operate at the level of the creation of the P4C curriculum as well as at the level of its implementation? Or to put it differently and provocatively: may not the very idea of a community of gestures<sup>4</sup> be 'just' the unfolding of an *arché*, a 'regulative' principle, already incubated in the 'primary scene' which gave rise to Lipman's innovative educational proposal?

The focus here will be, rather, on how (and in what sense) the 'invention' of the philosophical novel represents a movement of turning (the history of) philosophy inside-out, and on how such a movement, insofar as it is a 'storifying' of philosophy as distinct from, if not opposed to, its 'historicization',<sup>5</sup> is intrinsically intertwined with the involvement of children with their own way of thinking in the philosophical dialogue.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> See, David Kennedy, "The Five Communities," *Inquiry: Critical Thinking Across the Disciplines*, vol. 16, no. 4 (1997): 66-86.

<sup>5</sup> See, Sergio Givone, *Il Bibliotecario di Leibniz: Filosofia e Romanzo* (Torino: Einaudi, 2005).

<sup>6</sup> Matthew Lipman, "Philosophical Discussion Plans and Exercises," *Analytic Teaching*, vol. 16, no. 2 (1995-1996): 64.

### ***Situating Philosophy or What We Cannot Speak About We Must Narrate***

What is the 'inside' of philosophy which a philosophy for children allows one to "put on the outside" while putting "the outside on the inside"?<sup>7</sup> And why can only philosophy for children do that? And why exactly through the narrative medium?

We can move from the Deweyan notion of 'qualitative thought' mentioned by Lipman at the very outset of what I have called the primary scene of P4C. The emphasis on qualitative thought in Dewey is not first and foremost, despite Lipman's remarks, a matter of how thought is expressed (whether in sounds and in colors instead of concepts and logical relationships) but it entails a re-consideration of the entire process of thinking and of its 'products.'

If it is undeniable that "[t]he world in which we immediately live, that in which we strive, succeed, and are defeated is preeminently a qualitative world",<sup>8</sup> then—Dewey highlights—"the immediate existence of quality, and of dominant and pervasive quality, is the background, the point of departure, and the regulative principle of all thinking."<sup>9</sup> The question is not, therefore, to oppose qualitative to logical thinking—as if the quality concerned only *feeling* or intuition as non-thinking 'faculties'—but to recognize qualitative thinking as a sort of encompassing whole within which the logical dimension emerges and to which it looks back in order to gain its very *sense*. Dewey distinguishes between,

something called a "situation" and something termed an "object." By the term situation in this connection is signified the fact that the subject-matter ultimately referred to in existential propositions is a complex existence that is held together in spite of its internal complexity by the fact that it is dominated and characterized throughout by a single quality. By "object" is meant some element in the complex whole that is defined in abstraction from the whole of which it is a distinction. The special point made is that the selective determination and relation of objects in thought is controlled by reference to a situation--to that which is constituted by a pervasive and internally integrating quality, so that

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<sup>7</sup> Lipman, *A Life Teaching Thinking*, 106.

<sup>8</sup> John Dewey, "Qualitative Thought," in *The Later Works, 1925-1953*, vol. 5 (1929-1930), ed. J. A. Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1984), 243.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, 261.

failure to acknowledge the situation leaves, in the end, the logical force of objects and their relations inexplicable.<sup>10</sup>

Dewey notes that, while “in current logical formulations, the beginning is always made with ‘objects’,” actually “[no] such self-sufficient and self-enclosed entity can possibly lead anywhere nor be led to; connection among such entities is mechanical and arbitrary, not intellectual...In fact [subject and predicate] are determinations or distinctions instituted within the total subject-matter to which thought refers. When such propositions figure in logical textbooks, the actual subject-matter referred to is some branch of logical theory which is exemplified in the proposition.”<sup>11</sup>

The real subject-matter is, therefore, the situation and the latter, *as such*, “is not and cannot be stated or made explicit. It is taken for granted, ‘understood,’ or implicit in all its propositional symbolization. It forms the universe of discourse of whatever is expressly stated or of what appears as a term in a proposition.”<sup>12</sup> At the same time, though, “the situation controls the terms of thought, for they are its distinctions, and applicability to it is the ultimate test of their validity. It is this phase of the matter which is suggested by the earlier use of the idea of a pervasive and underlying quality.”<sup>13</sup>

We can call “the pervasive and underlying quality” the sphere of the ‘sense,’ whereas what falls within the possibilities of the “propositional symbolization” can be termed the sphere of the “meaning.”<sup>14</sup> Meaning is what is explicit, and can be stated and defined. Sense is what is included in every statement (insofar as it is meaning-ful) without being itself susceptible to be stated. In this perspective, by the idea of the meaning-fulness of a statement we refer not only to meaning(s) but to the fact that the statement emerges from a fullness of which it is an articulation (it is important to bear in mind that such fullness cannot be reduced to its articulations, even if all possible ones have been taken into consideration).

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, 246.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, 246-47.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, 247.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>14</sup> See, Bruno Coppola, *L'Ineffabile Bellezza: Filosofia e Narrazione* (Milano: Franco Angeli, 1996).

If not 'statable', the domain of the sense is not, however, ineffable nor does any Wittgensteinian verdict of the silence hang over it. In fact, it can be narrated – and should be, if we have to recognize its significance.<sup>15</sup> Narrative, insofar as it hands over the underlying quality—what I called the 'sense'—is not primarily an adventure of feeling but rather of thinking and it is ultimately a sort of inquiry. Indeed, a novel essentially presents a search for the sense in a problematic world on the part of heroes, who are "experimental egos."<sup>16</sup>

Even the meanings of philosophy do not come into being ready-made, like Minerva from the head of Zeus, but emerge from a background/fullness of sense of which they are articulations. As Dewey puts it at the beginning of *Experience and Nature*, philosophical problems are generated by "empirical needs" and "the refined products" of the philosophical inquiry have to be "return[ed]...back to the context of actual experience, there to receive their check, inherit their full content of meaning, and give illumination and guidance in the immediate perplexities which originally occasioned reflection."<sup>17</sup>

Reattaining such a background situation is ultimately an inquiry which can be reported principally through narrative. Beginning his first novel by 'situating' Harry Stottlemeier's discovery within a peculiar context, Lipman carries out a non-anodyne move: he makes clear that that discovery, like any other in philosophy, "probably wouldn't have happened" out of that situation, and along the whole curriculum the philosophical meanings investigated by the characters always emerge from and are constantly referred back to background situations.

And, for the aforementioned reasons, all this cannot happen unless in a narrative. By doing so Lipman puts the inside of philosophy on the outside; what is manifest in (the history of) philosophy—the concepts—are considered on their background, on the backdrop of the problematic (i.e., in need of inquiry) situations from which they derive. In Dewey's words:

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<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> Milan Kundera, *L'Arte del Romanzo*, trans. E. Marchi (Milano: Adelphi, 1988).

<sup>17</sup> John Dewey, *Experience and Nature*, in *The Later Works, 1925-1953*, vol. 1 (1925), ed. J. A. Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1981), 36-7.

The problem is had or experienced before it can be stated or set forth; but it is had as an immediate quality of the whole situation. The sense of something problematic, of something perplexing and to be resolved, marks the presence of something pervading all elements and considerations. Thought is the operation by which it is converted into pertinent and coherent terms.<sup>18</sup>

And such a movement of re-situating philosophy is not by chance also a movement of philosophy to children. Indeed, by drawing upon Merleau-Ponty, but with a peculiar hermeneutical bending, we can say that it is because we have been children that we are able to have a 'grip' on that original *doxa*, on that qualitiveness from which those (philosophical) objects named concepts emerge (or, to refer again to Lipman, in children there is eminently what Dewey called qualitative thought).<sup>19</sup> Accordingly, there is a sort of pre-established harmony in the fact that once Lipman decided to mobilise philosophy as a way of educating children for thinking, he invented a new kind of philosophical text and, on the other hand, that the invention of the philosophical novel happened within the framework of a reflection on the 'quality' of children's thinking.

From this perspective I suggest reading also Lipman's important distinction between concept and schema: the former is "an idea we have of a *class* of things that share one or more common features or [...] an idea we have of a *family* of things in which some features are shared by some members but no feature needs be shared by all members"; the latter is "not a static aggregate or mechanical agglomeration. It is organic and dynamic."<sup>20</sup> De Marzio points out sagaciously the relevance of such a distinction within Lipman's view of philosophical narratives as a model for children's thinking:

The schemata of thinking...would serve as the manner of organization of the philosophical text...the texts are not organized by systems of concepts, which would reflect an inert arrangement of 'digestible' facts, but rather the texts are organized according to schemata, which can be thought of as the tools or skills with which we question and make sense

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<sup>18</sup> Dewey, "Qualitative Thought," 249.

<sup>19</sup> See, especially, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception*, trans. William Cobb (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964); and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Child Psychology and Pedagogy: The Sorbonne Lectures, 1949-1952*, trans. Talia Welsh (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2010).

<sup>20</sup> Matthew Lipman, *Thinking in Education* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 219-220.





of the world and our place in it – that is to say, with which we engage in philosophical thinking.<sup>21</sup>

But the role of concepts is not to be underrated. Indeed, “[by] means of the organizing principles embodied in the class and the family, we are able to construct concepts by means of which we cluster the information in a given cognitive domain and make it manageable. Without organizing principles, a domain is a mere aggregation of data.”<sup>22</sup> I propose reading the difference between schema and concept into that between situation and object: situations are objectified in meanings (i.e., concepts) in order to manage them but, as concepts have sense only on the backdrop of situations, it is just in the movement of that schema *par excellence* which narrative is that concepts explored by the characters acquire their full ‘meaning’.

Lipman’s novels, insofar as they present a search for the sense of experience, represent/reconstruct inquiries into some concepts—of (the history of) philosophy—(passing) through their meanings towards the situations from which they (can) emerge and of which they are (possible) articulations. All this required—in the phase of the creation and writing of the novels—a ‘schematization’ of those concepts, which may be the most important of Lipman’s *philosophical* (not only educational) achievements (the ‘Sources and References’ for Lipman’s novels bear powerful witness to this ingenious work in its translation and re-territorialization of the conceptual heritage of philosophy).<sup>23</sup>

### ***Final remarks: Between dramatization and Bildung***

By ‘schematizing’ the concepts/meanings of the philosophical tradition, by re-situating them within the context of human experience and the search for sense, by translating and re-territorializing them into a children’s world, Lipman puts the inside of philosophy on the outside. This is the movement which presides over the

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<sup>21</sup> Darryl M. De Marzio, “What Happens in Philosophical Texts: Matthew Lipman’s Theory and Practice of the Philosophical Novel as Model,” *Childhood & Philosophy*, vol. 7, no. 13 (2011): 41.

<sup>22</sup> Lipman, *Thinking in Education*, 220.

<sup>23</sup> See, for instance, Ann M. Sharp & Ronald F. Reed, eds., *Studies in Philosophy for Children: Harry Stottlemeier’s Discovery* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992), 189ff.

“dramatization” of philosophy by “casting it in the modality of fictional narrative.”<sup>24</sup> We should take ‘dramatization’ in a double sense: first, it means that (the history of) philosophy is delivered from a monologic closure and is valorized in its dialogic potential. Bakhtin showed that dialogicity and plurivocality are the main features of the novel: the latter does not exist as a genre without a plurality of voices. The risk with the conceptual heritage of (the history of) philosophy reconstructed in Lipman’s novel could have been that it was presented in such an authoritative way that any real dialogue was excluded from the outset.<sup>25</sup> To make an inquiring dialogue between characters possible required that the meanings of (the history of) philosophy were themselves ‘dialogized,’ so to speak, and not dispensed as in a lecture. In this perspective, the movement through which he re-situates philosophy, that is, refers ‘philosophical objects’—concepts/meanings—back to the situation(s) within which the former make *sense* prevents Lipman from lapsing into forms of philosophical narrative like Gaarder’s *Sophie’s World* where the history of philosophy is presented in a quite canonical way, like a classic course of philosophy (and actually one does not understand why Sophie finds the course so different from school, apart from some enticing and adventurous allurement).

Secondly, we should hear in the word ‘dramatization’ the echo of the Greek verb *drân*, to do. Within Lipman’s novels and beyond them (in that community of inquiry which they contribute to modelling) *philosophy is done, not learnt* (once again differently from texts like Gaarder’s, that—paradoxically enough given the rich panoply of narrative strategies—are quite expository rather than narrative as far as philosophical ‘contents’ are concerned).<sup>26</sup>

To such a movement of dramatization, which Lipman realizes in creating novels, does another correspond within the texts:

Each of the novels in the Philosophy for Children curriculum begins with a problem and works its way through to some kind of solution by the end of the book. The curriculum is therefore, in a sense, a narrative

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<sup>24</sup> Matthew Lipman, “Philosophical Discussion Plans and Exercises,” 64.

<sup>25</sup> Michail Bakhtin, *Estetica e Romanzo* (Milano: Einaudi, 2001)

<sup>26</sup> Lipman, *Thinking in Education*, 214-15.



of the children's acquisition of the *moral qualities they are expected to model to one another*.<sup>27</sup>

The movement from problem to solution is that of *doing philosophy*, according to the Deweyan model of inquiry. The interweaving of cognitive growth and moral development, which characters experience through their philosophical inquiry, makes Lipman's novels a sort of philosophical *Bildungsromane*. The *Bildung* of Lipman's characters is not, however, the progress toward absolute knowledge (ultimately a de-situated knowledge in which concepts reign over situations) nor a kind of internal self-cultivation; in the word we should rather hear the resonance of what Heidegger, referring to *paideía*, called *Um- und Eingewöhnung*, a constant re-adjustment and familiarization with changing situations by deploying schemata and concepts to make sense of them.<sup>28</sup>

It is particularly relevant in Heidegger's expression that he connects *Bildung* to the semantic field of *wohnen* (=to inhabit). Without rehearsing his complex view on *wohnen*, what I am interested in is how Lipman, in his autobiography from which I have taken my cue, refers to a change of the world to inhabit as the main goal of his educational enterprise. In Lipman's words, what is at stake in his novels as the *Bildungsromane* and as the 'didactic tool' for the *Bildung* of children is the building of "a better and more reasonable world for our children and their children to inhabit: a world that looks as beautiful from across the street as it does from the distance of space."<sup>29</sup>

Turning philosophy inside-out consists ultimately in setting it free from its de-worlded insulation, to which the Academic tradition has condemned it for a long time,<sup>30</sup> so that philosophy—in Dewey's memorable words—"ceases to be a device for dealing with the problems of philosophers and becomes a method, cultivated by philosophers,

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<sup>27</sup> Lipman, *A Life Teaching Thinking*, 117.

<sup>28</sup> Martin Heidegger, "Platons Wehre der Wahrheit," in *Wegmarken* (Frankfurt am-Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1996), 217.

<sup>29</sup> Lipman, *A Life Teaching Thinking*, 170.

<sup>30</sup> See, Antonio Cosentino and Stefano Oliverio, *Comunità di Ricerca Filosofica e Formazione: Pratiche di Coltivazione del Pensiero* (Napoli: Liguori, 2011), 131ff.

for dealing with the problems of men"<sup>31</sup> and can, therefore, help to equip all of us, including children, with those habits of critical, creative and careful thinking which allow us to in-habit the world in an increasingly meaningful way.

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<sup>31</sup> John Dewey, "The Need for a Recovery of Philosophy," in *The Middle Works, 1925-1953*, vol. 10 (1916-17), ed. J. A. Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1980), 46.